

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine



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WELCOME TO MY PRISON

by Jack Ritchie

I GAVE Big Jim Turley the usual routine. You're here because of the debt you owe society. If you make trouble for us, we'll make trouble for you, but if you cooperate, one of these days you'll walk out of the gates a free man.

Turley smiled and looked at the ceiling.

Ed Pollard, my chief of guards, glared at him. "Wipe the smirk off your face when the warden's talking."

I paused a moment to light a cigar. "Your first three days here will be your orientation period. You'll be given a physical examination and various psychological and aptitude tests."

Turley looked a big man, and the two hundred dollar suit helped to cover the fact that not all of the bigness was muscle.

I studied him objectively and wondered how he had ever become so important. I could see the weakness in him, the flaws that I saw in so many others.

I folded my hands on the desk. "If you've got any questions, now is the time to ask them."

Turley grinned and glanced at Pollard. "I like privacy when I talk, Warden."

I was aware that Pollard's eyes were on me. I shook my head. "Anything you might have to say can be said right now."

Turley chuckled. "I guess I can wait. I'm going to be around for five years."

When Turley was gone, Pollard paced back and forth in front of my desk. He was an intense man, with the bitter fanatic eyes of one who has found that the justice of this world is not as harsh as his own. "Five years," he snapped. "He gets a lousy five years, and I'll be damned if he doesn't get out in half the time."

I leaned back in my chair. "All he did was steal money, Ed. He didn't kill anybody." I took a few puffs on my cigar. "You got a fine anger there, Ed, but I'll tell you what I just figured out. Turley robbed us taxpayers of about twenty-two cents per square head."

Pollard put his knuckles on my desk. "You're looking at it from the wrong end, Warden. Turley lined his pockets with a million dollars of the public's money."

He regarded me steadily. "Where does Turley spend his time in here, Warden? Does he start in the laundry like the poor people, or do we get him a feather bed and let him sleep?"

I glanced at the records on my desk. "He's just one person, Ed. You don't have to hate him like he was a regiment."

Pollard snorted. "He's just one of the crooks who was unlucky enough to get caught. He's covering up for the whole rotten up-state gang. He's taking the rap for Costa and his organization and he's doing it with a smile."

Pollard's face was a dark flush. "He'll be taken care of. All along the line."



Big Jim Turley. Surely with such a name, or moniker, one could not help but be a criminal of note. And though such a personage might receive the best of prison care, parents generally should be more careful in the names they foist upon their offspring.

WELCOME TO MY PRISON

I looked up at him and wondered whether it was worth the effort to show anger. I kept my voice quiet. "How far along the line, Ed?"

His mouth tightened. "I'd better get back to the job."

I grinned slowly. "Just a minute, Ed. Your face and your voice tell me that you're wondering if the organization got to me. Did Costa maybe slip me a little something to make this a heaven for Turley?"

Pollard was at the door. "I didn't use the words."

I nodded. "But you got their meaning across. You know that my job depends on politics and you know who's knee-deep in the politics of this state."

He waited, saying nothing.

"Ed," I said. "Nobody's got to me, politics or no politics. I don't know Costa and I don't know anything about his organization. I got this job before anybody ever heard of him and I still got a few friends in the capitol who can see that I keep it. Turley will get a number, just like anybody else."

Pollard managed a crooked smile. "You make me happier, Warden. Real glad."

At the end of three days I got the results of Turley's tests and examinations. I studied them carefully for more than an hour before I tore out one page and crumpled it. I burned it in my ash tray and sent for Turley.

He waited until the guard left the room and then sat down. "Some of those tests were downright interesting. I'll bet I didn't do too bad either."

I spoke softly. "On your feet, Turley. I didn't tell you to sit down."

A flush came slowly to his face. "Do you know who you're talking to?"

I smiled. "I think I'm talking to a prisoner. You've got five seconds to get up or I'll arrange for some special persuasion."

His jaw sagged slightly. After a moment he got to his feet.

That's the first part of it, I thought to myself. I'm the boss here and you're going to know it. I picked up his records and tamped the edges even. "I'm starting you in the laundry. We'll see if we can work off some of that lard."

Confusion flickered in Turley's eyes and he licked his lips. "I don't get it. Mr. Costa promised he'd fix everything."

"I don't care what your Mr. Costa promised. I don't take orders from him, you understand." My smile was thin. "Did he guarantee you that this would be just like a rest home? You'd have everything you wanted? Maybe even a couple of days outside the wall every month?"

I laughed. "Costa is just a dirty name to me."

Turley blinked indignantly. "They won't get away with it. I can blow the lid off. I'm not just anybody. I'm Big Jim Turley."

You're not big anything, I thought, when you're wearing that uniform.

"Costa's fingers don't reach this far," I said. I paused significantly for a few moments. "But that

doesn't necessarily mean that you've got to suffer."

I gave him sufficient silence to work on what I'd just said. He watched me, his eyes narrowed cautiously and waited for more.

I studied my cigar. "You don't have to lead a rough life here, Turley. Not if you're prepared to help yourself. I think I can be reasonable."

After a few moments he began to chuckle. "You scared me for awhile there, Warden. I thought I was looking at an honest man."

You scare easy, I thought. You quiver fast if somebody puts a thumb on you.

I smiled and looked at the ceiling. "You took a million, Turley."

He laughed shortly. "I spent it too."

I shook my head. "It's hard to get rid of that much money, Turley. I'd guess that you got a few pennies left."

Turley frowned. "Ten thousand. That's the best I can do."

I leaned back in my chair. "I was thinking of twenty-five."

He glowered. "Go to hell!"

I was watching him when he said it. The words were positive, but I could tell he'd go up to twenty-five.

"Turley," I said quietly, "you don't know how dead and buried you are here. I can be God to you or Devil. You got your choice."

He ran his fingers nervously through his hair a couple of times and scowled. "All right. Twenty-five. I'll have to get a letter out."

I pointed to my ink stand. "Write it here and make it this way. You want the money in hundreds. You want it thrown out of a car in a nice tight bundle at the junction of 42 and JJ at ten in the night. You name the day, but make it soon."

He raised an eyebrow and grinned faintly. "You didn't stumble over the words. I guess you've done some thinking about this."

"Yes," I said. "I put in a little time on it."

He began writing. "It'll take at least a couple of days for my wife to get the cash. How about Friday?"

I nodded and stood over his shoulder as he wrote. "Don't mention why you want the money and don't write any names."

When he finished, I took the letter from him and put it in the envelope he addressed. "I'll mail this outside. I don't think we want anybody to censor it."

I sat down and relaxed. "You're assigned to the library for the time being, Turley. But if things don't work out Friday, you're going to be made uncomfortable."

On Friday I left the walls and was at the junction before ten. There was no trouble.

I took a hotel room in the city for the night and counted the money. In the morning I put it in my safety deposit box at the bank and drove back to the prison.

When I got there, Pollard was waiting, his face splotted red with anger. He followed me into the office and came directly to the point. "I'd like to know why you put Turley in the library?" he demanded.

I studied Pollard while I removed the wrapper from a cigar. You'd be fool enough to resign if I let Turley stay in the library. You're built like that and you're a fool. It's taken you twenty years to get where you are now, but you'd probably throw it all away because you like to feed your righteous indignation.

I lit the cigar. "Turley scored good on his tests, Ed. You know I like to put a man where I think he'll do the best job."

Pollard's eyes glowed. "You're treating him like a guest." He leaned over my desk and his voice was harsh as he asked, "Is he a paying guest?"

I sighed heavily. "Ed, suppose you were sitting in this chair? Suppose you had to make the decisions? What would you do? Think about it fully, Ed."

His laugh was caustic. "I've been thinking about it. I've been thinking about it a lot."

I know you have, I thought. But it's just a dream, Pollard, old boy. You'll never sit in this chair. You're too brittle. You have to learn to bend with things to get to the top. It's that way everywhere, Ed. Not just here. But people like you never learn that.

I smiled faintly. "You'd make Turley sweat?"

"You're damn right I would," he snapped. "I'd stand over him personally."

I rapped my fingers thoughtfully on the desk and then looked up. "I could have made a mistake about Turley, Ed."

Pollard's eyes were suspicious and he waited.

I got to my feet. "We'll do it your way, Ed. If you want him in the laundry, that's where he'll be."

Pollard nodded with sharp satisfaction. He started for the door, but turned before he reached it. There was some color high in his cheeks. "I'm sorry—about—about what I said, Warden. I talk faster than I think sometimes."

Don't apologize too much, Ed, I thought. I'm not doing anything for you.

I smiled tiredly. "That's all right, Ed. Forget it."

Even though the medical report on Turley had sounded serious, I figured it might take some time. But at four-thirty that same afternoon Pollard came to me. His face was gray. "He just keeled over, Warden. He just dropped."

I looked up from the papers on my desk and frowned. "Who keeled over?"

Pollard's voice was shaky. "Turley. He's dead. I guess it was his heart."

I kept staring at him.

He shifted nervously. "I kept him sweating and hauling in the laundry. I stood over him and told him where he could go, when he complained that he was feeling sick."

I rubbed my forehead and said nothing for awhile. Then I flicked the switch on my intercom. "Novack, bring in Turley's records."

When they came, I slipped out the medical forms and read them. I pointed to a scrap of paper remaining under one of the staples. "It

looks like that was one page somebody didn't want me to read. Maybe it's the one that tells about Turley's heart."

I glanced at Pollard.

His eyes went wide. "You can't think that I'd do something like that?"

I looked away. "No. You've been with me a long time, Ed. I guess I can believe you if you say you didn't."

Pollard's voice was tight. "Sure I hated him. I hate all his kind, but I wouldn't deliberately get rid of him." A tic appeared on the side of his face. "One of the clerks could have destroyed that page."

I smiled sadly. "You want an investigation, Ed? Is that what you want?"

He hesitated. "Why not? I've got nothing to hide."

"Of course not, Ed," I said soothingly. I rubbed my jaw. "Turley had a lot of important friends and they can make things rough. If I started an investigation, it would eventually get out to the newspapers and a lot of people would be looking over our shoulders. They'd want a goat, Ed. They'd want to know who hated Turley enough to want him dead." I met his eyes. "They'd find one, Ed."

I got out of my chair. "Ed," I said quietly. "I think it would be better for . . . better for both of us, if this thing died right here. In this office."

Pollard was silent, not looking at me.

"Ed," I said softly. "You've got a wife and two kids."

He stood there for a good three minutes, working his hands into white-knuckled fists. Finally, he looked at me. "There's the doctor. He might want to know why we put Turley in the laundry if his heart was bad."

I shook my head. "He knows that we all make mistakes, Ed. Honest mistakes. I've known him long enough to ask for a favor." I patted Pollard's shoulder. "He's a good friend of yours too, isn't he, Ed?"

I left before the gates were sealed for the night and drove to the lake shore section of the city.

Mr. Costa fixed the drinks himself. He shook his head sadly. "So it was his heart?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I don't think he ever knew how bad it was himself."

He handed me my drink. "Jim looked so healthy."

"You can never tell, sir," I said. "He died in his sleep. Well . . . it was a peaceful way to go."

Costa shrugged. "At least we tried to make it easy for him. The organization prides itself on that. We like loyalty and Jim had it."

"Yes, sir," I said. "He lived like a king in there. He had everything he wanted—I saw to that." I looked at Costa over the rim of my glass. He didn't seem so big to me. Not now.

He sipped at his drink. "Too bad about Jim. We try to take care of our own."

"Yes, sir," I said. "We always do."

